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RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 2127
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 4679
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 BANGKOK 000234

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TAGS: [E A I D](#) [P G O V](#) [P H U M](#) [P I N R](#) [P R E L](#) [P T E R](#) [T H](#)
SUBJECT: STAFFDEL GROVE TRAVELS TO SOUTHERN THAILAND

BANGKOK 00000234 001.2 OF 004

Classified By: Ambassador Eric John; reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

11. (S/NF) Summary: On January 15, a Senate Appropriations Committee staff delegation lead by professional staff member Paul Grove traveled with Poloff and USAID representatives to Hat Yai in southern Thailand for discussions on the violence in the South. Thai government and security officials, academics, and representatives of news organizations painted a vivid but complicated picture of a brutal insurgency without a discernible political agenda or clear leadership. They also provided a read-out of the issues feeding the violence and the challenges faced by the security establishment. On the delegation's return from Hat Yai, the DCM along with representatives from DAO, JUSMAG and GRPO highlighted Mission's efforts to build Thai capacity at a national level, while respecting the Thai government's position that the South is a domestic Thai issue. In a separate meeting, an academic underscored the failure so far of the central government to effectively address the underlying cause of the violence.

12. (C) Summary continued: At the conclusion of this series of meetings, Grove noted to us the complexity of the insurgency in southern Thailand and recognized that the situation was currently (and hopefully will remain) a domestic Thai issue. He also believes, however, that the murky nature of the insurgency coupled with the Thai's reluctance to engage on an official level the issue of southern Thailand argues for increased vigilance and proactivity on the part of the US to preclude the situation from turning into an issue that directly affects US interests. Grove applauded Mission efforts to develop contacts in the deep south to keep abreast of developments. He suggested greater engagement with Thai military units to develop a better picture of specific military operations regarding who is being targeted, what is happening to suspects after detention, and how counterinsurgency operation are being carried out. He also applauded USAID's efforts to build structures necessary for reconciliation while keeping the profile of US involvement

minimal. He believes there is an opening for USAID to play a greater role in community development and reconciliation in the South. Finally he noted that the Thai government needs a media campaign to build public support for a comprehensive solution to the problem. End Summary.

¶3. (SBU) On January 15, Senate Appropriations Committee professional staff member Paul Grove (Minority Clerk of the Senate Subcommittee on State Foreign Operations and Related Programs, Committee on Appropriations), Michele Wymer, professional staff member of the Subcommittee, and Nikole Manatt, majority professional staff member of the Subcommittee, traveled with Poloff and USAID representatives to Hat Yai in southern Thailand to engage Thai officials, academics and press reporters on the insurgency in Thailand's deep south. In the morning the delegation had discussions with Prince of Songkhla University (PSU) radio station reporters and managers, the head-master of a dual curriculum private Islamic school in Narathiwat, a lecturer at the Peace Studies Center of PSU, and the vice chairman of the Songkhla Islamic Committee. (Note: PSU radio station receives funding from USAID as part of a project to improve the quality of news reporting in the deep south. The Islamic school headmaster receives US funding through the Asia Foundation as part of a Pondok school reform program.) In the afternoon, the delegation met with the Vice Governor of Yala province and the Director of the Royal Thai Police Southern Forward Command.

Meeting the Media, Academics, and the Clergy

¶4. (SBU) The morning meetings highlighted the ethno-nationalistic nature of the conflict and the scant national level attention it was getting in Bangkok. In a discussion about prospects for a new government to focus on the issue of southern violence, representatives from PSU

BANGKOK 00000234 002.2 OF 004

radio station noted that Bangkok was preoccupied with political intrigue surrounding control of government. They could not predict if or when Bangkok would again focus on the south. This meeting outlined for the delegation the issues driving the conflict: the belief among southern Thai Muslims that they do not enjoy the same rights as Thai Buddhists in areas of justice, education and religion, and the profound mistrust the Muslim community feels towards the Buddhist majority. In a separate meeting, the peace studies lecturer from PSU and the vice chairman of the Songkhla Islamic Committee echoed these sentiments. When questioned about the role of the Islamic Committee in mediating the conflict, the vice chairman of the Songkhla Islamic Committee claimed that the role of the Islamic committees had been weakened by the government because there is no separation between church and state in Thailand. The village, tambon, and district heads have all the power. He said the Islamic committees try to support reconciliation, but they are in a dangerous position -- between the government and security officials on one side, and the militants on the other.

¶5. (SBU) The media representatives, academic, and cleric agreed on the security situation as well: no one actually knows who is behind the violence; although there are over 30,000 troops in the south, the security forces cannot stop the killing; residents of the south are caught in a cycle of violence -- if a Muslim is killed, they know the next day a Buddhist will be killed. They noted especially the information vacuum regarding the violence. It is extremely difficult getting accurate information -- no one will talk because of fear. Anyone who talks to the press is taking their life in their hands. The blame for all the violence is put on the militants, but no one knows for sure who is responsible. The news organizations just report the incidents and try to verify facts with the few resources they have. Further, the government has the ability to prevent information from being disseminated via the media.

The Government Side

¶6. (C) The meeting with Vice Governor of Yala Grisada Boonrach was predictably upbeat despite a bombing in Yala's central market that morning. According to Grisada, a bomb attached to a motor cycle went off in the center of Yala injuring 47 people. Regardless of recent events, Grisada said violence in Yala was down compared to Narathiwat and Pattani, with Yala now being the least violent of the three provinces. Grisada sincerely believes the security situation has improved since June 2007, and that General Anupong's efforts to restructure the military effort in the south are paying off. He believes the government policy regarding the south will not change with the formation of a new government and claimed the human rights situation was improving. When pressed on human rights issues, Grisada responded by saying human rights NGOs have access to both government officials and detainees.

¶7. (C) Police Lt. General Adul Saengsingkaew, Director of the RTP Southern Forward Command also believes the government is making positive strides in improving the security situation, but was unable to clearly describe how a movement with such shadowy leadership and lack of political agenda could be so successful. He described a brutal attack the day before on a military unit deployed to protect teachers in which eight soldiers died. According to Adul, this attack, though more brutal than many seen lately, was a typical operation for the insurgents. Adul said the security forces are having success because they now have a better understanding of the structure of the insurgency at the village level, and the insurgents' mode of operations. The insurgents, however, have a remarkable ability to adapt their tactics to those of the security forces. When asked about the involvement of external actors in the insurgency, Adul said they have not seen any evidence of external involvement. According to Adul, the most important things he can do to end the violence

BANGKOK 00000234 003.2 OF 004

are to promote the rule of law and to use transparent methods of law enforcement. He also believes good governance is essential and reforming the system of education is critical.

Views from Bangkok

¶8. (S/NF) Meetings in Bangkok further highlighted the difficulties of addressing the problems in the South. The DCM, along with representative from DAO, JUSMAG and GRPO, provided the delegation with an overview of national level Thai government policy towards the South as it pertained to outside assistance, especially on military or security issues. They emphasized to the delegation the Thai Government's position that the insurgency is a domestic Thai issue with no room for direct involvement from the international community; they highlighted mission's efforts to build Thai capacity at a national level, while respecting the Thai government's concern about any international role in the South.

¶9. (C) Staffdel Grove also reviewed their concerns about the government's southern policies with Borwornsak Uwan, distinguished jurist and head of a government think tank. Grove emphasized the importance of addressing socio-economic issues that fueled Muslim discontent. Borwornsak agreed, although he noted that the Thaksin government had made some efforts to improve the economic situation in the far South. These efforts had not worked in part because there had been no unified policy, with different ministries and local officials all pursuing different strategies. Borwornsak also agreed that both the Thaksin government and the interim government had not been as focused on the situation in the South as they should have been. He explained that the problem seemed so intractable and confusing that many Thai officials are now discouraged and just do not want to think about it any more. Grove pointed out that more responsible media coverage of the situation might help to overcome this

tendency.

Comment

¶10. (C) Based on his observations and interviews with security and provincial government officials, local press, and academics, Grove came away with the following impressions: the ongoing situation in southern Thailand is not currently a threat to US interests. Should the situation deteriorate, however, it could become a major issue. Grove advocates taking a more proactive approach to the south, both to gain a better understanding of the situation and to assist the government in reconciliation efforts. Specifically, Grove believes USAID should become more active in formulating "soft" approaches to community development and reconciliation, rule of law, and conflict management while keeping visible US involvement to a minimum. This could include a media campaign to build public support for a solution to the conflict that address issues of social justice and security for all parties. He also noted the success mission is having in cultivating sources of information on the conflict outside of official government channels and recommends increasing those efforts, specifically with regard to understanding what the security forces are doing both to increase security and mitigate the conditions that are feeding the conflict.

¶11. (C) Post has long advocated exploring appropriate, discreet ways to do more to assist the Thai government with the intractable problem of violence in the South. Given Thai government sensitivities surrounding the South, Post believes a slow, cautious approach to increased assistance is warranted. Ultimately our ability to help will depend on a national level Thai government decision to accept our assistance. Of course, any new assistance (assuming additional funds were available), especially in the security and military realms, would have to be carefully vetted to make sure it was in line with our "locations and labels"

BANGKOK 00000234 004.2 OF 004

test, i.e. no visible USG training in the south, and no training elsewhere in Thailand that is publicly acknowledged as being only for use in the South.

¶12. (U) Staffdel Grove has cleared on this cable.

JOHN